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ABSTRACT

Classroom teachers are presented with a rationale and general information for teaching about controversial issues. Following an introduction, material is arranged in six sections under topical questions. The first section considers educational and social benefits of teaching about controversy. Motivation, application of social studies content and skills to real issues, and enhancement of intellectual skills are among the benefits discussed. The second section provides guidelines from the National Council for the Social Studies to help teachers choose controversial topics appropriate for the classroom. How to deal with parent or community problems that may result from teaching controversial issues is examined in the third section. Suggestions for introducing controversial issues to students not familiar with their use in the classroom and effective instructional strategies are presented in the fourth and fifth sections. The final section is a bibliography of resources for teaching about controversial issues. (LP)

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TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

ERIC Fact Sheet No. 10

ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
855 Broadway
Boulder, Colorado 80302

FACT SHEET NO. 10
September 1983

Teaching About Controversial Issues

In the 1980s, controversy and education seem to go hand in hand. Studies of our nation's schools, federal policies, teacher strikes, new instructional materials, budget deficits—all generate controversy and conflict. Ironically, the one place in the educational system where controversy and conflict are minimized is also the one place where their appearance could have great educational benefits—the classroom.

Studies indicate that learning to deal with controversy and conflicting opinions is important to students. Yet, for understandable reasons ranging from fear of reprisal to their own lack of conflict resolution skills, many teachers avoid and suppress conflict and controversy. Before these teachers will venture into this area, they need a rationale for doing so and answers to some tough questions. This fact sheet was written in response to that need.

What, specifically, are the benefits of teaching about controversial issues?

Teaching about controversial issues has benefits for teachers, students, and the society at large. Teachers are always looking for activities that will motivate students to learn, and studies have shown that controversial issues do just that. Discussing controversial issues has been shown to motivate students in both reading and research tasks. In addition, skill in dealing with conflict over issues will minimize the problems that usually accompany "uninvited" controversies into the classroom.

For students, the benefits are many. First, dealing with controversial issues allows students to apply what they have learned in social studies to an issue that has relevance to their everyday lives. Studies indicate that the result is enhancement of a range of intellectual skills. Learning methods for dealing with conflicting opinions is also a skill that students will need as adults, so classroom exercises will provide much-needed practice. Students will also learn about themselves as they work through the value conflicts that are inherent in a controversy. The articles cited at the end of this fact sheet provide evidence supporting these benefits.

While the benefits to society are less well documented, they are nonetheless important. Many educators have hypothesized that learning about controversial issues in elementary and secondary school may help counteract the apathy that has characterized the American public for a number of years. In addition, work in the area of delinquency prevention suggests that learning to deal with controversial issues promotes attachment to school and teacher and thus may contribute to reductions in delinquent behavior. While more research is needed in this area, instructional use of controversy clearly holds a great deal of promise.

What issues are appropriate for classroom use?

There is no one answer to this question. What is appropriate for one teacher, class, school, or community may not be appropriate elsewhere. The National Council for the Social Studies suggests considering the following questions in considering whether an issue is appropriate:

—Is this issue beyond the maturity and experiential level of the students?

—Is this issue of interest to the students?

—Is this issue socially significant and timely for this course and grade level?

—Is this issue one that you as the teacher feel you can handle successfully from a personal standpoint?

—Is this issue one for which adequate study materials can be obtained?

—Is this issue one for which there is adequate time to justify its presentation?

—Is this issue one that will clash with community customs and attitudes?

If you answer all of these questions and still have doubts, consult your principal or department chair. Remember, issues where there is disagreement over alternatives are numerous; if one issue is too complex, "hot," or sophisticated for your class or community, several more are bound to be suitable.

What if a teacher considers all these factors and still chooses a topic that offends some parents or other people in the community?

Teachers have the right to make significant decisions about what and how they teach, a right that has been upheld by the courts in numerous cases. This academic freedom has limits, however; three factors are critical:

- A teacher should not act so as to disrupt the school or incite students to do so.
- A teacher should not go beyond clearly stated limits to instructional discretion or violate explicit rules.
- A teacher should not use profanity.

In hearing academic freedom cases, courts also take into account specific surrounding circumstances and attempt to gauge the seriousness of the teachers' actions. Courts will also generally consider the maturity of the students, the opinion of other professionals in the field, and the relevance of the controversial item to the course.

A full discussion of academic freedom issues is provided in *Teachers Have Rights, Too: What Educators Should Know About School Law*, by Leigh Stelzer and Joanna Banthin, (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, and ERIC Clearinghouse for Educational Management), ED 199 144.

How can the study of controversial issues be introduced to students who are not familiar with their use in the classroom?

A number of writers have developed "rules" for guiding students' examination of controversial issues. The following list was adapted from a number of sources:

- Plan for treatment of controversial issues to be a regular occurrence in your social studies program. For example, plan to close each unit with an in-depth look at an issue on which students have conflicting views or set aside one day every two weeks for that purpose.
- Lead students to expect controversy in your classroom, but prepare them for it as well. Discuss what a controversial issue is and establish rules for dealing with one. These rules might include such items as (1) everyone who has something to say will have a chance to say it, (2) ideas, not people, will be argued, (3) sources of information will be cited, (4) all students will listen to their classmates' opinions.
- When a controversial issue is introduced or arises, identify it and make the nature of the disagreement clear, identifying areas of agreement or disagreement.

• Be willing to accept that not all issues can be resolved.

• Respect students' right not to express their opinion when personal values are being discussed. Some issues may strike too close to home; others may be difficult for some students to discuss for other reasons.

• Establish devices for maintaining group relations in the face of disagreement. Students should learn that disagreeing with a friend does not mean that the friendship must end. If students are able, guide them in developing the rules of behavior that will ensure continuing interpersonal harmony. One mechanism for maintaining harmony might be to end each discussion of a controversial issue with a class evaluation of how well students listened to each other and presented the evidence for their own views.

• Establish some means of closure; as the teacher, you will have to decide when agreeing to disagree is appropriate (in the case of freedom of religion) and when it is not (in the case of support for ritual murder).

• From time to time, encourage students to reconsider issues they have discussed previously to determine whether their opinions have changed over time.

• Use as many instructional techniques as possible in dealing with controversial issues.

What instructional strategies can be used in examining controversial issues?

Many strategies can be used, but all are used in support of students' working through a series of steps: identifying the issue, identifying alternatives, identifying the consequences or implications of each alternative, choosing an alternative, and—if appropriate—working toward group consensus and taking action.

In working through this series of steps, students can be involved in a range of activities. Role plays, simulations, and case study analysis are especially effective because they encourage students to both empathize with others and suspend judgment. In-depth study of one or more issues can also be effective. If an in-depth study is undertaken, adequate time must be allowed for each phase of the analysis: identifying the issue and possible alternatives, perhaps through whole-class discussion and brainstorming; investigating the consequences or implications of each alternative, whether through library research, interviews, or surveys; appraising the alternatives and choosing among them, through a culminating activity such as a series of individual reports, panel discussions, round table, full-class discussion, plays, modified debate, or audiovisual presentations.

In dealing with some issues, reaching consensus will clearly not be possible. With others, working toward consensus will add another dimension to the study, demonstrating how conflict is resolved in a democracy. The teacher's role in this process is helping students discover common viewpoints and values they can accept, working from there to identify modifications of their positions that account for these shared values.

When feasible, student action on behalf of a position can also be a valuable part of the learning process. Such action might include writing letters to the newspaper or to public officials, conducting a school forum on the topic, or presenting a petition to the school administration or student government.

An excellent, detailed discussion of instructional strategies for helping students deal with controversial issues is provided in *Elementary Social Studies: A Skills Emphasis*, by Richard E. Servey (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1981). While directed primarily at K-8 teachers, the discussion can easily be adapted for 9-12 application.

What resources for teaching about controversial issues are available through the ERIC system?

Numerous documents and journal articles on controversial issues and conflict resolution have been indexed in *Resources in Education* and *Current Index to Journals in Education*. For this fact sheet, we have selected a few recent journal articles from *CIJE*.

Journal articles are not available on microfiche. Reprints of many articles are, however, available from University Microfilms (300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48016). If your local library does not have the relevant issue of a journal, contact UMI for availability and price information. If you need more information on any of the topics, a computer search of the ERIC data base will identify numerous other articles and various kinds of documents related to controversial issues.

EJ 275 142. "Why Teach About Nuclear Power," by Jennifer Armstrong, *Bulletin of Environmental Education* 138 (November 1982), pp. 5-9. Discusses reasons why nuclear power/technology should be taught; offers materials for lessons in geography, history, politics, and economics.

EJ 274 160. "Teaching High School Students About Political Terrorism" by Lucien Ellington, *Clearing House* 56, no. 4 (December 1982), pp. 161-163. Reprint available. Examines generalizations concerning political terrorism and suggests methods and materials social studies teachers can use to develop a basic understanding of terrorism.

EJ 270 499. "Teaching Peace," by Richard J. Barnet, *Teachers College Record* 84, no. 1 (Fall 1982), pp. 30-37. Reprint available. Provides suggestions for teaching about the arms race from an historical perspective and for teaching about alternative security systems.

EJ 264 884. "Developing Conflict Resolution Skills," by Francis J. Lodato, *Momentum* 13, no. 2 (May 1982), pp. 25-27. Reprint available. Provides a rationale and suggests an approach for incorporating conflict resolution skills and insights into the elementary school social science curriculum.

EJ 260 650. "World Hunger: Teaching About World Hunger," by Jane Simpson, *Today's Education: Social Studies Edition* 71, no. 2 (April-May 1982), pp. 46, 48. Discusses the teaching of world hunger in the classroom, using controversial questions and maps.

EJ 258 682. "Debating Controversial Issues," by Earl P. Bell, *History Teacher* 15, no. 2 (February 1982), pp. 207-223. Reprint available. Discusses techniques and provides background information to help teachers use debate in U.S. history courses. By debating controversial issues, students learn to do in-depth research.

EJ 254 871. "Teaching Children to Resolve Conflict: A Group Approach," by Jeffrey L. Edleson, *Social Work* 26, no. 6 (November 1981), pp. 488-493. Reprint available. Outlines a three-stage training program that focuses on teaching a limited set of skills to children for use in conflict resolution. Stages include readiness activities, skill training, and structured generalization.

EJ 253 067. "Can Conflict Be Constructive? Controversy Versus Concurrence Seeking in Learning Groups," by Karl Smith and Others, *Journal of Educational Psychology* 73, no. 5 (October 1981), pp. 651-653. Reprint available. Describes a study in which 84 sixth-graders were assigned to three conditions and studied two controversial issues. Controversy, compared with concurrence seeking and individualistic study, promoted higher achievement and retention, greater search for information, more cognitive rehearsal, and positive attitudes toward controversy and classmates.

EJ 245 [illegible] "Building Motivation Through the Use of Controve[illegible] by John P. Lunstrum, *Journal of Reading* 24, no. 8 (May 1981), pp. 687-691. Reprint available. Shows how encouraging students to discuss controversial issues in relation to their reading can help improve their comprehension.

EJ 205 652. "Conflict in the Classroom: Controversy and Learning," by David W. Johnson and Robert T. Johnson, *Review of Educational Research* 49, no. 1 (1979), pp. 51-70. Reprint available. Research indicates that classroom controversy facilitates students' problem-solving, creativity, perspective taking, and transition in stages of cognitive and moral reasoning. Conditions affecting outcomes of controversy are summarized.

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